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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews current research on girls' delinquent and violent behavior, the factors contributing to it, and effective programming strategies to prevent it. Girls are more involved in violent crime than they were a decade ago. Their murder rate is up 64%, although status offenses (offenses only because the perpetrator is a minor) continue to comprise most of girls' arrests. The violent crimes committed by girls differ from offenses by boys. Girls are more likely to use knives, more likely to kill someone as a result of a conflict rather than during a crime, and more likely to murder or fight with family members. Current research on adolescent violence and delinquency considers how social class, race, ethnicity, and culture interact to cause young women to behave violently. To serve young women effectively, programs must develop culturally sensitive, gender-specific approaches to intervention. A recent review of existing programs for girls suggests that three common elements combine in program success: (1) comprehensive counseling; (2) educational and occupational support; and (3) support for young women not able to remain with their families. (Contains 13 references.) (SLD)

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GIRLS AND VIOLENCE

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GIRLS AND VIOLENCE

Girls' involvement in delinquency and crime, though still less than boys', appears to have increased significantly in the last two decades. There is, however, little knowledge about the causes of girls' violence, and few studies have been conducted on young women's crime and delinquency. Meda Chesney-Lind and her associates have undertaken the most comprehensive analysis of these studies. They have provided much insight into this complex issue, showing significant differences between violent acts by girls and boys. This digest reviews current research on girls' delinquent and violent behavior, the factors contributing to it, and effective programming strategies to prevent it.

The Scope of Girls' Delinquency and Violence

The Nature of Girls' Crime

Girls are involved in more violent crime than they were a decade ago; their murder arrest rate is up 64 percent, for example. Still, violent crimes accounted for only 3.4 percent of girls' arrests in 1994 (Chesney-Lind & Brown, 1999). Changes in the way girls are charged, as opposed to the commission of more violent crimes by girls, may explain part of the increase in arrests for violence. For example, a girl who, in self-defense, shoves her parents out of the way as she tries to run away is now likely to be arrested for assault, a criminal offense; previously, she would have been arrested for the lesser status offense of running away (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998). Nevertheless, status offenses (considered offenses only because the perpetrator is a minor), such as running away, prostitution, or curfew violations, continue to comprise most of girls' arrests, possibly because of a public tendency to sexualize girls' offenses and attempt to control their behavior (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998).

Differences Between Girls' and Boys' Violence

Violent crimes committed by girls differ significantly from boys' offenses. Boys are two to three times more likely to carry weapons, and girls are more likely to use knives than guns, boys' weapon of choice. Girls are more likely than boys to murder someone as a result of a conflict rather than during a crime, and to murder and fight with family members (Girls Incorporated, 1996). Girls remain less likely than boys to be arrested in general, and far less likely to be arrested for violent crimes (homicide, forcible rape, aggravated assault) and serious property offenses (burglary, arson). The sex ratio of arrests has changed very little over the decade, since the recent increases in the arrest of girls parallel increases in boys' arrests, suggesting that the upward trend simply "reflects overall changes in youth behavior" (Chesney-Lind & Brown, 1999, p. 176).

Girls' Participation in School-Related Violence

Most, but certainly not all, aggressive acts in school, such as physical fighting, bullying, and weapon carrying, are carried out by males and aimed at males. One study reported that while nearly 18 percent of the boys carry a weapon to school only 5 percent of girls do so (Flannery, 1997). Another showed, however, that in schools characterized by large numbers of boys carrying weapons, there is a correspondingly high rate of girls with weapons, although boys may carry guns while girls carry knives (Webster, Gainer, & Champion, 1993).

Causes of Girls' Delinquency and Crime

Psychosocial Theories

In the 1970s violent girls began receiving more attention from researchers because of the perceived increase in their offenses and because of the involvement of more women in scholarship. Much of the work focused on explaining why so few girls and women participate in criminal activity compared with males, rather than on what motivates females toward crime and delinquency.

Biological differences between males and females were assumed to be a reason for the crime rate differential. Differences in socialization were also thought to produce aggressive and independent males and passive, dependent, and conventional females (Artz, 1998). The increase in female violence was attributed to the perpetrators' renunciation of femininity and the adoption of masculine characteristics and values. The women's movement, which fostered assertiveness and was said to encourage young women to adopt certain "male behaviors" (drinking, stealing, and fighting), was blamed as well (Adler, 1975). Subsequent research, including data showing that the increase in female crime was really not significant, discredited most of these findings (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998).

Social and Environmental Risk Factors

Current research on adolescent violence and delinquency considers how social class, race, ethnicity, and culture interact to cause young women to behave violently (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998). It also helps explain why girls join gangs: to develop skills to survive in their harsh communities and temporarily escape a dismal future (Campbell, 1991; Chesney-Lind & Joe, 1995).

Women jailed for crimes, compared with their male counterparts, are much more likely to report previous ***sexual or physical abuse***, ranging from 40 percent to 70 percent of respondents in various surveys (Artz, 1998; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998; Koroki & Chesney-Lind, 1985). Violent young women are more likely to come from ***troubled or violent families***. Their home life, characterized by poverty, divorce, parental death, abandonment, alcoholism, and frequent abuse, leaves them quick to anger, distrust, and revenge (Artz, 1998; Koroki & Chesney-Lind, 1985).

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Girls from poor families may seek recognition by adopting a "bad girl" image upon finding that their college aspirations will go unrealized, as they are unable to gain status through white middle-class means (i.e., schooling, careers). But they also embrace ***traditional gender role expectations*** for the future: marriage, support by a man, a large family, and work in stereotypically female jobs. They think that men should be strong and assertive, and women passive and nonviolent (Koroki & Chesney-Lind, 1985). Such beliefs may hold young women in abusive romantic relationships and raise their risk of engaging in delinquent and violent acts (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998).

Artz (1998) hypothesizes that a major factor in girls' aggression toward other girls is a general negative view of females based on a personal ***low sense of self-worth***, resulting from sexual abuse and an internalized belief in women's inferiority. Bottcher's study (1986) of young African American and Latina women incarcerated for serious offenses identified additional factors which propelled them toward violence: ***leaving home or being kicked out; considerable free time without adult supervision***; and an **"inadvertent drift" into violence** and crime as their lives began to fall apart.

In general, ***school failure*** increases young people's risk for violence and delinquency (Artz,1998), although poor school performance appears to have a stronger effect on girls than boys (Rankin, 1980). While high grades and positive self-esteem seem to depress girls' involvement in violence and delinquency, boys' high grades raise their self-esteem, creating favorable orientations to risk-taking and thus greater delinquency (Heimer, 1995).

Implications for Interventions

To serve young women effectively, programs must develop culturally-sensitive, gender-specific approaches. They must take into account the fact that girls' problems are often gender related (i.e., sexual abuse, male violence, role in the family, occupational inequality, early motherhood), and must develop gender-specific approaches. Unfortunately, funding for programs addressing delinquent girls' unique needs has been low: in 1975, for example, only $1.00 of every $4.00 donated by corporations was spent on programs for girls (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998), and a recent review of youth program evaluations showed that only 2.3 percent of delinquency programs served girls only.

A review of the few existing programs effective with at-risk young women suggests that three common elements combine to support them in all facets of their lives (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998). First, a ***comprehensive counseling component*** addresses the multiple problems of delinquent and at-risk young women, including sexual abuse and violence in teen relationships. Second, successful programs include ***educational and occupational support***. Third, they ***address the needs of young women not able to remain with their families***. Further, they provide young women with access to caring adults and organized community activities.

Girls Incorporated (1996) has recently published a review of promising programs which target delinquent and at-risk girls. Effective programs include many Girls Incorporated programs which are sponsored nationally. Examples include Friendly PEERsuasion, which addresses issues such as helping girls to avoid substance abuse; Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy, which teaches strategies for avoiding early pregnancy through better parent-daughter communication and postponing sexual activity, and provides health care; Operation SMART, which enhances science and technology skills; and FUTURE (Females Unifying Teens to Undertake Responsible Education), which provides peer support in such areas as substance abuse, sexual and physical abuse, and gang involvement. Girls Incorporated has also identified local programs whose effectiveness results from customization for the local female population.

Finally, because male violence and aggression against young women are often a factor in female delinquency and violence, separate programs need to be developed for aggressive and violent men and boys. This would minimize the risk of female victimization and, in turn, reduce the risk of girls' participation in violence.

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